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LABOR MAKES A STAND IN LOS ANGELES

THE AFL-CIO IS ON TARGET IN REACHING OUT TO LIKE-MINDED GRASS-ROOTS GROUPS TO REVITALIZE THE MOVEMENT.

By Peter Dreier and Kelly Candaele. Los Angeles Times. October 8, 1999.

Will historians look at the AFL-CIO's national convention, meeting in Los Angeles this week, as a turning point in the labor movement's revival or as the swan song of a political dinosaur?

Most of the hoopla surrounding the meeting has centered on whether the delegates will endorse a Democratic presidential candidate or remain neutral until Vice President Al Gore and former Sen. Bill Bradley duke it out in the early primaries. Both candidates know that unions can deliver volunteers, money and other campaign resources. Indeed, unions are the only major force that can counter the vast resources that big business and the religious right provide the Republicans.

Although the endorsement issue is important, the real question is whether the labor movement will even exist as a political and economic force in a decade. John Sweeney was elected AFL-CIO president in 1995 as part of a reform insurgency, promising to rekindle labor's membership, political clout and social justice agenda. Union leaders picked Los Angeles for its convention because they see the movement's future in this city's workplaces and neighborhoods. It is here that labor's attempt to resurrect its grass-roots base will be tested.

Just as in the 1930s--when Detroit, Chicago and Pittsburgh were centers of labor organizing in the mass production industries of auto, steel and rubber--today, Los Angeles is the laboratory for new organizing strategies. Back then, labor staked its future on organizing the corporate behemoths like Ford and U.S. Steel. Today it is wagering that it can win collective bargaining agreements in the growth sectors of the "new" economy--tourism, entertainment, light manufacturing, health care and other service industries--that dominate Los Angeles.

With the decline of heavy manufacturing in the U.S., union organizers have turned to these sectors. The AFL-CIO and several unions are devoting significant staff and financial resources to recruit unorganized baggage handlers, security screeners, ramp personnel and food service workers at LAX. The hotel and restaurant workers union just settled a high-stakes struggle with USC over job security for cafeteria workers and janitors. And the service employees union organized 70,000 home-care workers in the region--the largest single union victory since the 1930s.

But the area's massive light manufacturing sector has so far resisted unionization. The United Food and Commercial Workers' victory at the Farmer John plant in Vernon, where more than 1,000 low-wage workers, mostly Latino immigrants, won a union contract, is one of the few recent success stories in this sector.

Los Angeles has the widest gap between rich and poor of any major American city. While Los Angeles gets much attention for being the most culturally diverse metropolis, the fissures of class are as deep as those of race.

Labor leaders realize that unions have to build new alliances. In Los Angeles, unions have been reaching out to religious institutions, community groups and college campuses. Priests, nuns, rabbis and ministers now regularly participate in union picket lines and labor rallies. A growing number of congregations have mobilized around social justice issues, such as their support for the successful campaign to win a living-wage law.

Local unions have forged alliances with community and immigrant organizations. Union staffs now reflect the work force's ethnic diversity. Meetings are held in several languages. Unions help workers with their housing problems, assist their efforts to become citizens and register them to vote. In its organizing drive among Latino and Asian employees at the New Otani Hotel, the hotel workers union has enlisted the support of many Latino and Asian civic and political activists. The L.A. Alliance for a New

Economy--a coalition of union, community and religious groups--is pushing City Hall to revise its economic development priorities to create private sector jobs with decent wages.

L.A. also has been a stronghold of the Union Summer program, which has recruited thousands of college students for internships, many of whom have become leaders of the anti-sweatshop movement. Labor still faces many challenges. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to a rebirth is the nation's labor laws, which give employers an unfair advantage when unions seek to organize workers. If unions help Democrats win the presidency and regain a majority in Congress, labor law reform may be a top legislative priority. But Los Angeles' union activists aren't waiting for Congress to improve the organizing ground rules. If labor and its new allies can make significant gains here, they might help narrow the nation's widening economic disparities and usher in a new era of social justice.

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